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Collective Participation in Child Protection Services: Partnership or Tokenism?

Kollektiv brukermedvirkning i barnevernet: partnerskap eller retorikk?

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how collective participation can help involve service users in the improvement of child protection services. Results from the action research project “User participation and professional service in the child protection services” (Seim and Slettebø 2007) provide the basis for our discussion. Two of several initiatives in the project aimed at collective user participation undertaken in cooperation with two Child Protection Centres in Norway are presented: a dialogue-based participation group for youths in child protection, and a group for parents who have lost custody of their children (The “User Group”). The initiative for young people resulted in changes in the practice of the child protection centre, and The User Group provided the parents with the opportunity to influence child protection services. The findings suggest that there is great need to further investigate models for collective user participation in order to provide service users with the power to influence service delivery.

NORWEGIAN ABSTRACT

Denne artikkelen drøfter hvordan kollektiv medvirkning kan involvere brukere i bedring av barnevernets tjenester. Resultater fra aksjonsforskningsprosjektet ”Brukermedvirkning og profesjonell praksis i barnevernet” (Seim og Slettebø 2007) er utgangspunkt for diskusjonen. Vi presenterer to av flere initiativer med kollektiv brukermedvirkning som ble gjennomført ved to barnevernsentre i Norge: en dialogbasert gruppe for ungdom i barnevernet og en gruppe for foreldre som er fratatt omsorgen for barna sine (”Brukergruppa”). Initiativet for ungdom resulterte i endringer i praksis ved barnevernsenteret, og ”Brukergruppa” ga de biologiske foreldrene mulighet til å påvirke praksis ved barnevernsenteret. Våre erfaringer viser at det er stort behov for videre utforskning av modeller for kollektiv medvirkning for å gi brukere mulighet til å påvirke utformingen av tjenestene i barnevernet.

Collective Participation in Child Protection Services: Partnership or Tokenism?

This article reports from the project “User participation and professional practice in the child protection services”, an action research project in cooperation with two child protection centres in Norway (Seim and Slettebø 2007). In the article we focus on how the collective user participation of young people and birth parents in child protection services may help to improve service development in general. User participation in child protection is usually limited to individual involvement. Until recently there has been scant attention paid to collective user involvement aiming at developing and improving the child protection services. Two cases are presented here: a dialogue-based participation group for young people and one for birth parents. We explore whether collective user participation helps service users to gain influence or whether these new practices are merely a façade of democratisation.

Understanding the concept *collective user participation*

We use the term *collective participation* when user participation to influence practices and policies is used to improve the collective good (Olson, 1995 [1965]). Here, we focus on child protection services and service delivery. The term *collective* refers to the goal of improving services for everyone in the same situation. Collective action theory (Olson, 1995 [1965]; Elster, 1985; Diani and Eyerman, 1992) uses the term *collective* to mainly imply that there is more than one participant, and the term encompasses the actions of a group, an organisation or a social movement. However, on some occasions collective action may refer to the actions of one actor, while it is the *aim or goal* that determines whether the act is individual or a collective (Elster, 1985; Udehn, 1993).

The concept *user* refers to the role that children and parents have in relation to child protection, representing only a small part of their lives (McLaughlin 2009). In addition to being *users*, they are *actors* in their own lives and may have many roles in various social arenas (Sandbæk, 2002). Being child protection service users gives both children and parents a special *stake* in the service operation and legitimises their right to exert more influence upon these services than do other citizens. Although the interests of children are of primary focus, both children and parents must be considered users within this context. The interests of

children and their parents cannot be seen as independent entities, because these services often affect the entire family.

A context for collective user participation

It has been suggested that modern social movements have contributed to the increased democratisation of society (Tarrow, 1994; Tilly, 2004; Williams 2001). These movements have led to the recognition that all citizens should be autonomous and actively involved in decisions affecting their lives. Marginalised groups formerly characterised as passive victims now work for greater civil and political rights through social movements and self-help organizations and activities (Beresford and Croft, 2004; Halvorsen, 2002; Seim 2006). The challenge here is to further develop the potential for inclusion that exists in a fully participating citizenry – theoretically, politically, and in practical terms. According to Marshall (1965), citizenship provides individuals with civil, political and social rights as well as some obligations. These rights are understood to include participation and influence in decision-making. Understanding citizenship as *participation* represents what Lister calls “an expression of human agency in the political arena” (Lister, 1998:6). The concept “human agency” underscores an *action-taking* quality of citizenship (Lister, 1998; Williams 2001). Citizenship in this sense does not simply reflect one’s formal status, but rather, implies that every group in society can express its citizenship by actively participating in decision-making processes.

The United Nation’s Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) from 1989 provides another argument for user participation in the child protection arena. The Convention was ratified by Norway in 1991 and incorporated into Norwegian law in 2003. The document asserts that children under the age of 18 years share traditional human rights, civil rights and other freedoms. Respect for the integrity of the child and for children’s opinions is given expression in UNCRC 1989, Article 12:

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

At the same time, the Convention recognises that children have special needs, including the need for support and protection. The European Convention on Human rights (article 8) supports the interests of parents and makes it clear that decisions concerning children in protective services must include the views and the interests of the birth parents (Oppedal 2007).

Professional theories of social work reflect this wave of democratisation. Theories that value liberation and self-determination in the social work setting have existed side by side with paternalistic theories that primarily transform users into objects (Seim, 1984). Since the 1970s theories based upon empowerment, user participation and a human action perspective has followed in the footsteps of Paolo Freire and his pedagogy of liberation. Theories based upon empowerment have an individual dimension aimed at enabling individual human beings to control their own lives, and a political dimension concerned with using individual knowledge for collective action (Freire, 1972; Solomon, 1976; Gutiérrez, 1990; Slettebø, 2000; Williams, 2001).

Research on user participation in the child protection services has mainly focused on the individual participation of children and parents (see for example: Hill, 1997; Thomas and O’Kane, 1999; Sinclair, 2002, 2004; Seim and Slettebø, 2007; Slettebø, 2008; Healy and Darlington, 2009; Holland, 2009; Vis and Thomas, 2009). Until recently few have focused on collective participation (Seim and Slettebø, 2007). In Norway, Follesø (2004) studied “Landsforeningen for barnevernsbarn”, a Norwegian organisation representing the interests of children in state-provided care. She concluded that the organisation had influenced child protection policies in Norway and had extended children’s right to receive child protection until 23 years of age. In Australia, Mason used participatory research methods involving children and young people that provided a model for out-of-home care (Mason and Gibson, 2004; Mason, 2008). This research emphasized both the importance of including the special views of children when planning these services and suggested that children be given the power to have participatory influence on these processes. One young participant in a Ireland-based group designed to incorporate the views of young people in child protection service planning stressed this point: *“So, if you want to consult, involve or listen to young people, our messages to you are: ‘Don’t ask if you’re not serious’ - tokenism doesn’t work and we can easily see through it. We’ll vote with our feet ... and not come back”* (Willis et al., 2003). Our literature review shows that collective user participation in the child protection services is a

concept which needs to be developed, both theoretically and empirically, an effort to which this article aims to contribute.

Participation and power

User participation in contemporary discourse is a concept with positive connotations and has become fashionable in recent years. The content of the concept, however, is so vague that there is the danger that it may lose its potency in confrontation against paternalistic and repressive welfare systems. From our perspective, the term “collective user participation” must include the ability for users to have the power to influence the shape and delivery of services.

This point was clearly expressed in the classic article from 1969 by Sherry Arnstein entitled “A Ladder of Citizen Participation”. This article focused on citizen participation via community action programmes in poor US neighbourhoods in the late 1960s. Arnstein noted: “*The fundamental point is that participation without redistribution of power is an empty and frustrating process for the powerless*” (Arnstein, 1969, p. 216). Here, she distinguished between participation *as empty ritual* and participation *from a position of power*. The two lowest steps in her metaphor of a ladder were *manipulation* and *therapy*, symbolising co-operation that inhibited protest. The three next steps were *information*, *consultation*, and *placation* and indicated levels of tokenism as they provided possibilities for being heard, but without any guarantees for wielding influence or power. Only the three top steps on the ladder, *partnership*, *delegated power*, and *citizen control*, were considered to represent true *participation*, because each of these three steps allowed for the co-determination of policies. Although some of Arnstein’s ideas have been disputed, we agree that citizen participation without the redistribution of power is an empty ritual, and we have found her ladder metaphor useful when discussing the impact of user participation.

Developing collective participation

The two initiatives in focus here highlight the effects of collective user participation. Using an action research approach (Seim and Slettebø, 2007), both child protection personnel and users were invited to take part in developing various forms of participation. The first initiative was a dialogue-based participation group for youths at a Child Protection Centre and the second

was a user group at another Child Protection Centre. The centres were located in two different cities in the eastern part of Norway.

Ethical considerations

The project described in this article was approved by the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD), which holds responsibilities in relation to the Personal Data- and Health Register Acts. In accordance with the ethical requirements from NSD, participation in group meetings was voluntary and users signed written statements of consent. In the case of youths under 18 years old, both the youths and their parents consented. The child protection workers in our study gave oral consent in accordance with the contracts with the child protection centres. While the youths were given opportunity to read minutes from the meeting, only one youth turned up for the second meeting and commented on the minutes. The birth parents in “The User Group” and child protection workers were offered the possibility to read earlier drafts of this article, and both parents and child protection workers read and commented orally in meetings. Care has been taken to protect the anonymity of participants throughout the text.

In preparation for the initiatives, the researchers interviewed all personnel and a random selection of 21 parents and 10 youths at the two child protection centres in order to chart their experiences with participation, their attitudes towards participation, and to collect concrete suggestions for improving participation. While 80 per cent of the selected parents agreed to be interviewed, only 60 per cent of the selected youths were interviewed, either because their parents or the youths themselves refused.ⁱ The interviews were semi-structured and followed an interview guide consisting of open questions.

Evaluation of these initiatives included participant observation during group sessions, interviews with participating parents and youths, and group interviews with child protection personnel and users after the initiatives were completed. After transcribing and interpreting the interviews, the researchers discussed their interpretations and written conclusions with the participants.ⁱⁱ

User participation was a foreign concept for the youths we interviewed. They had hardly any experience of individual participation in decision-making. Most of them viewed their child protection caseworkers as distant and exhibiting little personal interest. Most of the parents received services provided by child protection authorities while their children were living at

home. These parents suggested that their participation in decision-making processes had been effective. Parents who had lost the right to custody of their children, however, felt disempowered in their dealings with the authorities. Both parents and youths expressed interest in collective participation aimed at improving these services.

The interviews with the child protection personnel showed that most of them were unsure how collective user participation would be translated into practice. Most were interested in testing models for collective participation, but some questioned whether users had the resources to contribute constructively. Others asked whether collective participation would have any real effect or lead to desired change. This led to the relevant question for our discussion: were the initiatives merely rhetorical exercises that gave way to tokenism or were they activities leading to active participant citizenship?

A model for dialogue-based collective participation

Together with the child protection personnel we developed a model called *dialogue-based participation* to serve as the basis for our experiments. We wanted a model for collective participation that encouraged knowledge development via dialogue between the stakeholders. The model was inspired from theories concerning democratic decision-making processes, discourse ethics and deliberation (Habermas, 1981). These perspectives assert that knowledge is created through dialogue between different parties in a shared situation and that disagreement does not necessarily lead to conflict. Rather, disagreement may lead to reflection and thus the development of new solutions. The model also has similarities to other research methods, including *group interviews*, *research circles*, *dialogue conferences* and *focus groups* (Guldvik, 2002; Wibeck, 2000), as well as the model *user contributions in evaluations of quality* (Krogstrup, 1997). Our model distinguishes itself from the others in that its aim is not only knowledge production, but it also promotes channels for collective user participation for the service users.

Four principles are integrated into our model. The first states that users should be provided with opportunities to develop knowledge in community with others in the same situation. The second states that users should decide which dimensions are most important when evaluating services. The third principle, in accordance with discourse and deliberation theories (Eriksen, 2001), states that knowledge is generated through the direct dialogue between users and child

protection personnel. The fourth principle requires that a moderator be present in order to generate an additional perspective. The researchers took on the moderator role for the purposes of this project.

We employed a four-phased model for collective participation:

Phase 1. Group interviews with service users and service workers in order to hear the experiences of users and discuss their ideas for change.

Phase 2. Group interview with child protection personnel where they discuss the themes that emerged in phase 1 and make suggestions for change.

Phase 3. Dialogue meeting between users and child protection personnel in order to discuss the suggestions for change proposed by the personnel.

Phase 4. Continuing dialogue and cooperation if users so desire.

The user's experience of contact with child protection authorities is the point of departure for dialogue in this model, but we do not see the user's perspective as the only valid source of knowledge. In this model the perspectives of users and those of child protection personnel shape one another, as does the *external* point of view represented by the researchers. The meeting of these three parties provides a basis for dialogue and a foundation for developing new knowledge and new insights for all parties.

Case 1: Dialogue-based collective participation with young people

In order to improve the centre's services for youths, the child protection workers wanted to engage their young users in collective participation based on dialogue between stakeholders.

The first phase in the model entailed that young users were invited to a group interview. Ten youths were randomly selected and invited to participate. Five of these did not come to the meeting. Among the participants one was over the age of 18 and the other four were between 13 and 14 years of age.

The youths were asked to openly discuss their contact with child protection authorities, what they experienced as being good, what they experienced as being bad, and the possible suggestions they had for improvement. The criticism and suggestions of three of the youths, who were in foster care, constituted the content of these meetings, whereas the two who were

living with their parents and received support via home based services said very little. The three foster youths were critical of the services and their relationships with their child protection worker. They agreed that contact with their child protection worker occurred all too seldom. As one of them noted, *“The child protection authorities never find out about our living conditions. Children can’t speak freely to people they don’t know, people they see two or three times a year”*. The foster youths suggested that the child protection workers should always speak to them in private, but just going into an adjacent room wasn’t enough. One noted, *“It would have been great if we took a walk together or went to a cafeteria. I’d feel freer. It’s not cool to cry at home, because then the others would notice that I had been crying.”*

These youths maintained that it was important to have someone who could follow them up over time, especially as these authorities represented continuity in their life histories, being the only ones who knew them from when they had lived in their original families up until their moves from one foster home to another. The lack of information the youths had received concerning their own early histories was a sore point and they claimed that they neither knew why they were placed in foster care originally, nor why they were moved from foster home to foster home. The foster youths all agreed that it would be better to know the truth, even if the truth might be difficult to hear and accept. One of them explained, *“We have to know about our real situation, as it is. That creates security. We don’t want anything to be hidden from us.”*

Another sore point was that the foster youths lacked influence in determining their circumstances. One foster youth, who was over 18 years old, spoke about moving from one foster home, where she had lived since she was a very little girl, to another:

“It was really tough, I was 11 years old and one morning I was told that I had to move. When I arrived at the new foster home, I was told ‘You will be living here’. I mean they could have spoken to an 11 year old and asked me what I wanted to do!”

At the end of our meeting the youths summed up their suggestions for the child protection authorities:

- Children must have a trusting relationship with a child protection worker who is able to follow the developments and changes in their lives.

- Children must be informed about their personal history.
- Children must be heard and must be able to speak freely and confidentially with their child protection workers, without parents or foster parents in attendance.
- Children must be able to participate in developing the plans that are made for them.

The second phase in the model consisted of a group interview among child protection workers. The researchers summarised the criticism and suggestions for improvement that the youths had made during the first phase. A long and engaging discussion ensued. Some of the child protection workers were sceptical to the criticisms that were reported and indicated that the researchers had been too naïve and gullible when presented with the youths' versions of reality. These comments were qualified by the child protection worker who attended the first phase group interview, who stated that there was no reason to doubt the subjective verity of the reports. This worker, however, qualified her remarks by stating that the children probably could not remember everything that had happened in their lives and that some memories were more incomplete than others. As she noted:

I knew that much of what was being said was incorrect. They reported heartfelt experiences. No matter how much we might want to disagree, we must take their experiences seriously. We have to try to do what we can, and make improvements. Their criticisms were very interesting to hear.

The child protection workers agreed that the youths must have the possibility to report their experiences, but they also felt that this concern was being addressed far better than it had been in the past. Several workers pointed to the difficulty of telling children the truth about their early histories without hurting the child and damaging the parent-child relationship. As a response to the youths' criticisms and suggestions for improvement, the child protection workers prepared a summary of their practices and presented their own list of suggestions for improvement. In order to promote a better understanding of the child's own personal history, the child protection workers suggested that each foster child be provided with a *Book of My Life* – an album of memories comprised of photos and a written text that recorded each child's and youth's growing-up stories. They were also keen to change their own practices so that the youths they served would take a more active role in planning their own futures.

Only one of the five invited youths attended the third phase of the dialogue process.ⁱⁱⁱ This youth was satisfied with his current relationship with the authorities and noted, “[The child

protection workers] were among the most important people in my life". This youth noted that the suggestion to create a *Book of My Life* and to include children and youths in planning sessions for their own future were important improvements. He agreed that foster children should know their own personal histories and they should have an influence on decisions to be made about their lives.

Did dialogue-based participation with youths make an impact?

The narratives of the foster youths provided the child protection personnel with an enhanced understanding of the youth's subjective views concerning their relationships to child protection services. The service personnel reported that these meetings had yielded more knowledge about the lives of young people in their care than had the questionnaires they had formerly used, and they wanted to continue to arrange dialogue-based participation meetings with the youths. The encounters with young people in care had led to concrete changes in their practice. The *Book of My Life* idea had been implemented and children and youths had been included in meetings designed to plan for their futures.

Since only one of the youths attended the phase three meeting, it is less clear whether participation in the dialogue group enabled the youths to experience that their participation would lead to the active practice of citizenship. After the first meeting (phase one), the youths noted that it felt good to have been asked about their experiences. This phase can be understood as a form of consultation and did not represent citizen power, but was *tokenism*, using Aronstein's terminology. The youths were listened to and their stories taken seriously, but still, they had no real influence in decision-making. Even though changes were made in practice, no new authority had been afforded to these youths.

Our findings corroborate the reports from the Australian project, in which the child participants had conveyed meanings about care that had differed from those views put forth by the adult groups (Mason 2008). Like the youth participants here, the Australian youth participants had emphasised the need for continuity and stability in relationships, as well as the importance of having control and power in their lives and access to information. As with our experience, the Australian youth participants seemed to feel powerless and declined to participate in a final forum, because they believed they would not be taken seriously (Mason, 2008: 367).

Challenges regarding collective participation with youths

Since continuing dialogue meetings did not take place, our proposed model for collective participation was only partially undertaken in this instance. There may be several reasons why the youths did not want to continue the dialogue based participation. One possible reason is that they did not directly experience their participation having any impact on child protection practices.^{iv} Another reason may be linked to the fact that the group interviews were arranged in the same way that meetings for adults are arranged at child protection centres. Use of more creative forms of communication may lead to greater interest among youth participants. The mutual scepticism in the relationship between child protection authorities and the participating youths may also have been important. Despite the limitations suggested by this first example, the next instance suggests that when the model is more thoroughly adhered to, dialogue-based participation can provide possibilities for collective user participation.

Case Two: Collective participation for parents

Our interviews with parents, youths and the child protection workers indicated a need for better services for birth parents once children were placed outside the home. At the Child Protection Centre, the workers wanted to improve services for parents. A trial program was created using an improved version of the dialogue-based participation model, this time with more direct and continuing dialogue between child protection workers and service users.

In a first phase all parents who had children over the age of 12 in foster care were invited to a roundtable discussion. The discussion was aimed at disclosing the parents' previous experiences with the authorities and the help they desired. The parents suggested the establishment of a group in order to exchange experiences with others in a similar situation, but they also wanted to improve the situation itself, that is, their goal was collective user participation. *The User Group* was established for these purposes. The parents wanted to establish a collaborative relationship with child protection authorities and asked child protection personnel to attend their group meetings. Additionally, they aimed to ensure that results would be communicated more formally and requesting a researcher to regularly attend meetings and to issue reports from the trial project.

During a period of four years The User Group met regularly every sixth week. In time, the group's perspective was broadened through the invitation of additional actors to join the

discussions, including regular participation by representatives from the Norwegian Association of Foster Homes, and guest participation by psychologists, lawyers and journalists, according to the particular topic of interest to be discussed. In order to hear the points of view of youths in the system, members of the National Association of Children in Care were invited to some meetings.

The parents reported that these discussions had enabled them to place their own experiences in a broader perspective. Parents and the professionals alike maintained that they had developed valuable knowledge about the total situation encountered by a family whose children were removed and placed in foster homes. This new knowledge led to changes in the work of the local protection centre. The parents participated more actively and tried to use more channels of communication in order to influence thinking in regional and central governmental bodies. They took the initiative to use the media and made the headlines in an article published in a local newspaper (Drammens Tidende, 2004). In 2005 NRK, the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation produced a one-hour program introducing The User Group and discussing this format for collective participation in the child protection arena. The User Group was invited by the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs to present their views on proposed changes in the Act relating to children's welfare.

Did the User Group promote any changes?

Participators in the User Group developed a feeling of community with one another as a result of their meetings. The parents noted their appreciation for the meetings and desire to invite other parents to join the group. In a letter of invitation they expressed the benefits they had experienced working in this group:

This is an important message for those of you who haven't noticed that we have our own meetings at the Child Protection Centre. We are clients of the child protection authorities because they have "stolen our children" from us. Even so, as a result of our meetings, they do seem to be taking us seriously. Our statements are believed and our experiences are being recorded so that others don't receive the same treatment.

(Meeting invitation written by one of the parents 2003)

The parents suggested that they had participated in the group for two primary reasons. First, they wanted to meet other parents who had gone through a similar process:

It was great meeting the other parents; it was like coming out of the closet. I have been feeling so lonely for many years. I thought it was only me who had experienced this with the authorities. I have started to think of myself in a different way, that there are things in my life that I can be proud of too.

A second aim was to use their experiences to gain influence in order to develop the services:

I have participated in The User Group because I have so much to say. I'm a very experienced user you know, and the professionals have a lot to learn from listening to me. I want to contribute to an improvement of the services in order to prevent other parents being met the way as I was.

User participation often seemed to combine the purposes of personal fulfilment and general influence. This particular group of parents seemed to realize that their most difficult life experiences suddenly had become meaningful. Their history gave them an important insight that they could use to help others. In this way, group participation promoted valued social roles and citizenship.

The child protection personnel reported that their co-operation with parents in The User Group had led to changes in their attitudes towards the parents. Child custody procedures have since been changed due to the co-operation that the authorities have had with the group and these changes are exemplified in the remarks of one worker:

We have indulged our foster parents because we have been afraid that they would cancel their contracts. Now, we no longer tolerate breaches between foster parents and parents. Sometimes old prejudices do recur and we doubt that co-operation is possible. But I work in a completely different way now. I am sure that I will be able to build up a working relationship between parents and foster parents. I would not have said the same six months ago. That is the big surprise!

The model for collective user participation practiced by The User Group seemed to provide parents with an opportunity to develop more self-confidence, as parents took active responsibility for leading the group. They also developed greater consciousness concerning the possibilities they had for taking effective action in their own situations. They were effectively acting to promote the collective interests of the group of people in society to which they belong and so we saw the beginnings of active citizenship in their practices.

Does this form of user participation represent tokenism or is there a degree of citizen power as described by Aronstein's ladder? While decision-making power was not delegated to the User Group, the results of this co-operation do point to the power that The User Group gained to influence and change the assumptions and practices of the child protection service personnel. This power was reflected in the development of mutual respect and confidence and derived from constructive dialogues between The User Group and child protection workers. Parent participants gained a greater consciousness of the diverse channels that exist for exercising influence and realised that their interests could be promoted through research, media interest, and parliamentary action. This form of user participation does not represent tokenism, but with reference to Aronstein's ladder, it is not citizen power either. We believe that the concept *partnership* fits best, because it points to the power that participants have to influence one another.

A relevant question to ask is whether close dialogue with child protection workers has mitigated The User Group's critical potential. Many of the parents were sceptical of The User Group at its inception. One parent said, "*What in the world have these child protection authorities got up their sleeves?*" Indeed, several of the parents had engaged themselves in The User Group because they had been involved in serious conflict with the authorities. They saw group participation as an opportunity to vent their anger. Many child protection workers were also sceptical. Very few believed that it would be possible to develop fruitful co-operation with the parents. One of the child protection workers reflected upon the unexpected results, noting:

I have experienced that these parents have a greater store of resources, greater than any of us formerly believed. They have suggestions for improvement and new solutions that none of us would have predicted. I never realised that they could sit together with us and discuss the situation in the manner they have.

The User Group had from its inception an open quality that provided room for criticism and emotional blow-outs. Parent participants spoke directly and often vented their dissatisfactions and personnel participants ably handled the criticism. While service personnel often expressed their agreement with the criticisms that were vocalised, they also were able to speak directly whenever they felt that criticism was unjustified. One personnel participant exclaimed, "*They are a grumpy and quarrelsome lot!*", but continued by saying that he greatly appreciated the

frank and open dialogue with the group. This suggests that the critical potential of The User Group was not compromised.

The experiences of The User Group suggest that it *is* possible to generate collective user participation. The process, however, demands a high degree of openness, mutual respect and a willingness to overcome criticism from both sides through co-operation. Group discussions concerning their practices in phase two had already indicated that the personnel were critical of their ways of working and wanted to institute changes. Personnel participants were particularly attentive, however, to the criticisms voiced by parent participants and had no desire to quell dissent. Rather, they hoped that the critical words would lead to new ideas and changes.

The User Group refined our model for collective user participation. The User Group was established in close connection with parent participants and a third party action researcher was present from the very beginning. This differs from other *top-down* participation initiatives in that a long-lasting process enabled the development a relationship between user and worker based on confidence and as well as created a space for all participants to feel empowered.^v

Concluding remarks

Our initiatives have shown that collective participation initiated by the child protection authorities can provide service-users with the opportunity to influence public services. In order to succeed, user participation needs users who are willing to engage themselves in dialogue with child protection workers, even if there has previously been serious conflict. Success is also dependent upon workers who are open to criticism and to changing their own practice. Additionally, user participation in child protection must include children, youths and their parents, and user participation must include an element of power. Without the power to effect change, collective participation is reduced to empty rhetoric and may lead to even greater powerlessness for the users involved. The concept of social citizenship suggests that children and their parents have the right to actively influence the decisions that have an effect upon their lives. In order to realise this idea, groups of people “at risk” must have the possibility to actively participate and influence decision making on the policies that regulate these contingencies.

Professional work based upon user participation is still in its beginning stages and there is still great need to further investigate models for collective participation in within the arena of child protection. We did not succeed in our attempt to generate meaningful participation of youths within the child protection system. In our experience, and corroborated by the research from Mason (2008), it is particularly difficult to initiate collective user participation with young people, while the experiences from Landsforeningen for barnevernsbarn (Follesø (2004) indicate that it is possible for young people to make an impact in child protection... The development of models for active participation for children and young people should therefore be given high priority.

There are dilemmas involved in increasing user participation in the development of child protection practices. The participants involved in collective action cannot represent *all* users, but this does not alter the fact that collective user participation can widen and challenge the administrative and professional perspectives that currently underlie child protection practice. Child protection authorities must clearly have the power to protect children. This argument must not however lead us to abandon our attempt to create a space where practice can include increased participation and influence by children, youths and their parents in the delivery of child protection services.

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Newspapers

Drammens Tidende 21.06.04

Notes

ⁱ Since most were under 18 years of age, the youth and their parents or foster parents both had to agree. In three cases, parents refused. One youth refused and another agreed, but failed to show up at the interview.

ⁱⁱ In action research knowledge is to be developed of together with participants, who are asked to discuss formulations in written materials and reports, even though the researcher is responsible for the wording in those reports.

ⁱⁱⁱ One answered that he saw no point in attending, another that the meeting was too far away from home. A third did not want to attend because he found it depressing to listen to the other's stories about their negative experiences with child care authorities, and he was worried about what those authorities might do with him. The fourth gave no reason for not attending.

^{iv} Because of a time lapse of four months between the first and the second group interview, partly due to research requirements, the youths did not know whether or not their suggestions had consequences for child protection practices.